

THE ADMIRAL BYRD ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION ON EASTER ISLAND, 1933

by John H. Bryant

TWO SHIPS SAILED ON THE SECOND Byrd Antarctic Expedition: *The Bear of Oakland* and the *Jacob Ruppert*. They left Boston for New Zealand in 1933, heading for the summer season at Byrd's base on the Ross Ice Shelf ("Little America") in Antarctica. My father, Glenn H. Bryant, joined the *Bear* in New Zealand and spent the summer on the ice. Later, both ships (traveling independently) returned to New Zealand, then headed home through the Panama Canal to be welcomed by President Roosevelt in Washington.

On the way to New Zealand, the *Jacob Ruppert* stopped for a brief time on Easter Island. The ship arrived on 15 November, 1933. Most of the crew went ashore and rented horses to ride out to the quarry at Rano Raraku. At some point, several expedition members brought ashore special broadcast radio equipment that the expedition had on loan from CBS Radio Network. Byrd had contracted with them to produce a live radio show about the Expedition to be broadcast back to New York via shortwave and then carried on AM radio, via the CBS Network. The program sponsor was Grape Nuts, by General Foods (which also supplied the expedition with almost unlimited amounts of dry cereal). The CBS broadcasts were wildly popular in the US and continued throughout the expedition.

Although Byrd's book about the expedition, *Discovery*, discusses the interlude at Easter Island, he does not mention the broadcast. However, two of the photos in the Byrd Polar Research Center archives show that a broadcast, featuring Rapanui, did take place! As evening approached, most of the expedition took to their cutter and returned to the *Jacob Ruppert*. However, according to Byrd, some of the scientific party wandered inland to study the archeological sites and were left ashore to be picked up later. Unfortunately, strong winds came up abruptly, preventing the cutter's return, stranding the scientists ashore for a very wet uncomfortable night. The next day, the winds were even stronger and Rapanui aboard the *Ruppert* felt that it might last for several days, so they steamed around the island to reach a lee shore somewhere near 'Anakena where they put their Rapanui guests ashore and picked up a the bedraggled and foot-sore scientific party.

The rocky shore and lack of safe harbor on the island, along with the continuing high winds, convinced Byrd to

press on. He said later that the winds and lack of safe harbor gave him pause to think how he might explain to the expedition sponsors, the National Geographic Society, the US Navy and the CBS Network just how the leader of an Antarctic expedition managed to allow his command ship to founder and sink on the rocky shore of a Polynesian island!

At the end of the Expedition, the two ships left Little America together and headed home but their differing



Easter Island, November 16, 1933. Members of the Byrd expedition visit Rano Raraku. Admiral Byrd is second from the right, wearing khaki. Photo Courtesy of the Byrd Polar Research Center Archival Program, Accession #20057.

speeds and sailing characteristics soon caused them to part company. They were in New Zealand for refitting, but left separately and traveled back to the United States by different routes. The *Ruppert* stopped in both Tahiti and the Canal Zone. However, *The Bear of Oakland* traveled from Dunedin directly to Easter Island, where it stopped for four days before raising anchor for the Panama Canal and home.

Because Admiral Byrd was aboard the *Jacob Ruppert*, not the *Bear*, his book naturally discusses his 1933 stop at the Island and only briefly mentions that the *Bear* stopped there on the way home. This latter trip and a four-day stay at Rapa Nui was the occasion of my father's visit to the island. Unfortunately, there are neither papers nor photos describing this stay on Rapa Nui by members of the expedition. Aside from a woodcarving collected by my father, no evidence exists of that visit other than a brief mention in Byrd's book and a few rather hazy second-hand memories passed on to me by my father.